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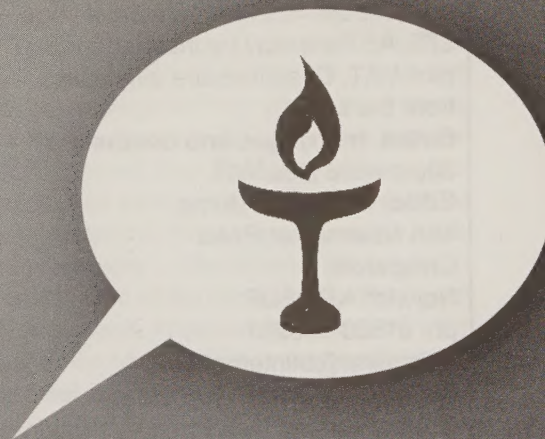
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talking the talk

inter-faith in the community



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The INQUIRER

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"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

*From the Object passed at the
General Assembly of the Unitarian and
Free Christian Churches 2001*

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Inquiring Words

How to address a mystery?

How does one address a mystery?

Cautiously – let us go cautiously, then, to the end of our certainty, to the boundary of all we know, to the rim of uncertainty, to the perimeter of the unknown which surrounds us.

Reverently – let us go with a sense of awe, a feeling of approaching the powerful holy whose lightning slashes the sky, whose persistence splits concrete with green sprouts, whose miracles are present in every place and moment.

Hopefully – out of our need for wholeness in our own lives, the reconciliation of mind and heart, the conjunction of reason and passion, the intersection of the timeless with time.

Quietly – for no words will explain the inarticulate or summon the presence that is always present even in our absence.

But what shall I say?

Anything – any anger, any hope, any fear, any joy, any request, any word that comes from the depth of being addressed to Being itself – or, perhaps, nothing, no complaint, no request, no entreaty, no thanksgiving, no praise, no blame, no pretence of knowing or of not knowing.

Simply be in the intimate presence of mystery, unashamed – unadorned – unafraid.

And at the end say – Amen.

– Gordon B. McKeeman

Inter-faith work – more than words

By Mel Prideaux

Inter-faith dialogue is a bit of a buzz word at the moment. Increasingly good relationships among faith groups is seen by politicians as important in the development of cohesive communities. State funding is made available for inter-faith projects, local authorities support inter-faith consultative groups, and new bodies for inter-faith dialogue are constantly being formed. In itself, this is no bad thing, but what interests me, and what formed the basis for my PhD research, is what people actually believe, say, and do in local communities where practical inter-faith work is being undertaken.

My main conclusion is rather controversial in the field of inter-faith studies. I argue that many of the traditional theological texts of inter-faith dialogue neither address the needs of local communities, nor hear from their experiences. Furthermore, this is a considerable failing in a branch of theology which needs to increasingly understand itself as of immediate and practical relevance in the contemporary world.

The conclusions of my PhD were based on fieldwork among Christians and Muslims in Beeston Hill, a neighbourhood of South Leeds. My research took place, part-time over 5 years at the University of Leeds. I was lucky enough to be generously funded by the Hibbert Trust, and supported by the Hibbert Trustees. The focus of my research was 'Faith Together in Leeds 11', a Muslim-Christian-secular partnership project in Beeston Hill funded by public money.

Through interviews and observations I was able to research the religious motivations and outcomes of the project. I found a notable absence of the language of the theologians of inter-faith dialogue, who are usually concerned with issues of truth and meaning. The traditional orientation of inter-faith theology towards texts, histories and leaders is distant to the local experiences of religious diversity.

In my opinion, the needs and experiences of people living in religiously diverse communities are not met through the formal model of dialogue meetings with which most theologians, and indeed religious leaders, still work. Instead, it is the informal, practical reality of sharing space and activities which both influences, and is influenced by, personal understandings of God and truth. The Anglican vicar of Beeston Hill, the Rev Bob Shaw, expressed this in a diocesan newsletter:

Inter-faith dialogue in Beeston Hill is not an intellectual exercise pursued by individuals who are interested in that kind of thing. It is a succession of ordinary everyday life encounters between people who come from different backgrounds. These encounters enlarge our vision of God's presence among us and are therefore very precious.¹

These 'ordinary everyday life encounters' are not based on discussions of theology, but they are still religiously significant. They are also politically important – because they are the encounters which the government seeks to encourage and enable in order to support more cohesive communities.² It seemed to me, while observing and interviewing, that while theology keeps inter-faith dialogue in an ivory tower, or at best

a meeting of community 'leaders', community members get on with the messy but fulfilling business of working and learning together.

Voices from Beeston Hill

During my fieldwork I interviewed Christians and Muslims who were involved in practical dialogue, and ask them about their motivations, their theology and their experiences of informal dialogue. I also took part in, and observed, activities and events organised at the two community centres created through Faith Together in Leeds 11: Hamara Healthy Living Centre and Building Blocks (a Parents' Resource Centre and private day-care nursery). Although religion and faith were often discussed, conversations were rarely about the relative merits of the two religions, but were instead about working together for the common good.

This strong emphasis on 'right action' over 'right belief' was important for many people involved in working with people from other faiths. This was noted by a respondent who is herself not religious but is a respected community activist:

The idea of faith is strong but its faith that, for most people their religious faith takes the form of looking to see what good can be done in the community and how people can be brought together whether those people believe in God or not, or believe in each other really.³

For many people in Beeston Hill, theology was not an important consideration. One Christian respondent commented:

I've just got a very, very simple faith, and I just take the bit where it said in the Bible if you believe like a child you're fine, you're OK. That's OK for me. I'm not worried about deep theological things you know, so it's quite a simple faith.⁴

This comment still seems particularly important to me. This woman was credited as being one of the early local drivers for Christians to work with Muslims in the area. However, she felt she had a 'simple' faith and was not concerned with the theological debates and schools of thought regarding inter-faith dialogue. This was not unusual, and was also evident among local Muslims, whose concern to work with others was also motivated by faith, but distant from theological debates. One Muslim community worker said in interview that '... working with the Christian community is, for me, no different to working with a Muslim community ... the Islamic faith teaches to serve others basically'.⁵ One of the principle Muslim figures in the Faith Together in Leeds 11 project also noted the often recounted fact that '... the Muslim faith is very much sort of intertwined with general day to day life in the community and what have you'.⁶

Muslims often referred to Islamic teachings to support their desire to work with Christians, but many were motivated by the experience of living alongside Christians. For example, a younger, Asian Muslim woman commented (using the word 'English' but in response to a question about relating to 'Christians'):

I think it's from my upbringing to be honest. From an

3 Interview with G, atheist community activist, March 2005.

4 Interview with B, Christian local resident and community activist, July 2004.

5 Interview with L, Muslim community worker, June 2006.

6 Interview with M, Muslim community worker, June 2004.

(Continued on next page)

1 Bob Shaw, 'Inter-Faith in Beeston Hill, Leeds', in Charles Dobbin, ed., *Interfaith Task Group of Leeds Diocesan Council for Mission Bulletin*, (Leeds: Leeds Anglican Diocese, 2005), p. 4.

2 Department for Communities and Local Government, *'Face-to-Face and Side-by-Side': A Framework for Inter Faith Dialogue and Social Action* (London: HMSO, 2007).

Start with respect and shared interests

(Continued from previous page)

early age I always had English friends, my bridesmaid at my wedding was an English girl, I've always had English people around me my youngest child one of his nanas is an English lady who took him on. ... I think it's from being very young; it's something my parents taught about just you know, you just get on with everybody.⁷

This was echoed in the experience of Christians, including those who had in fact had theological education at University. One Christian woman was informed by her theological education to respect the religion of others, but had found this to be brought to life by living alongside Muslims:

But now our friends are Muslims, [I have] a whole new perspective, you tend to know far more about their practices, everyday life, which is very interesting. I think its very important for Christians to get to know each other and understand what people's faith means to them, because I think out of that come respect and I think unless you know how it works out in everyday life it's very hard to get to that level of understanding. We have to work together to find common ground. [...] You love everybody and you love yourself then you accept their religion and you have respect. [...] I think my respect for other religions has deepened as I've got to know people on an everyday level and got to know them as friends but I always started out with that belief that you should respect everybody's religions.⁸

In the Faith Together in Leeds 11 project, Muslims, Christians and those of no religion worked together to create community centres which are owned separately but share strategic management through the Faith Together in Leeds 11 board. The community centres were the result of practical dialogue among local community activists. However, the buildings also created new opportunities for dialogue by creating spaces where Christians, Muslims and those of no faith could come into contact with one another. In English language classes, groups for parents and toddlers, and community meetings and educational events Christians and Muslims grow in knowledge of one another.

Although the centres were clearly a special space for such contact, they were not the only place where such dialogue took place. One Asian Muslim woman told me how she had been posting a large pile of *Eid ul-Fitr* cards one year when *Eid* fell about a month prior to Christmas. As she placed the envelopes in the pillar box an elderly white man passing by commented 'You're early for Christmas'. There followed a convivial conversation when the woman explained the Muslim festival. The woman felt that what really mattered, in her eyes, was 'ordinary' people having 'ordinary' conversations.

Notable by its absence in these observations and comments is any reference to the theological language and arguments of inter-faith theology. The distinctions between exclusivist, inclusivist or pluralist theology were not referred to in interviews with those who had theological training.⁹ Although people knew about the important theological differences between Islam and Christianity these were not issues which Muslims and Christians felt were relevant to their everyday life.

A Unitarian perspective

I hope this article has demonstrated the importance of local, everyday inter-faith dialogue. In my opinion, the inter-faith dialogue which religious leaders and scholars are involved in privileges a theological position which is principally Christian, and which fails to value the significance of the informal relationships between people. At best, the leaders and scholars see the local and informal dialogue as a necessary precursor to 'real' dialogue, which is about truth and meaning. Yet a woman in a religiously diverse neighbourhood, who has acted out of deep Christian conviction to effect real change for the benefit of her neighbours, can comment that 'I'm not worried about deep theological things you know'. In places like Beeston Hill there is a taken-for-granted response to theology that sees it as irrelevant to the real needs and issues of a local community. Contact between Muslim and Christian leaders in international conferences continues to be important and high-profile.¹⁰ In Beeston Hill, however, there is as little knowledge about these gatherings of leaders and academics as there is about the library shelves of books exploring the truth claims of Islam and Christianity.

Clearly, a serious public theology which seeks to engage religiously diverse neighbourhoods must develop and model forms of inter-faith dialogue that relate to the practical realities of such neighbourhoods. Although I have attempted to articulate the gap between the dominant inter-faith discourse of theologians and the local inter-faith experience of communities, I have only raised the question of how this gap is to be bridged.

A Unitarian perspective might be to ask what, if anything, our role is in the contact between Christians and Muslims? It was interesting in my fieldwork to realise that universally the Muslims I interviewed assumed I was a Christian, and the Christians I interviewed assumed I was of no religion.

Although I avoided discussing my own religious beliefs, it was sometimes unavoidable that they would become apparent. Unsurprisingly, given what I have already said, nobody wanted to engage in a deep theological discussion. What mattered was a starting point of respect and shared interest, and in the end, a determination to DO the right thing, not BELIEVE the right thing.

Two academic articles have been published arising from my research:

Prideaux, M. (2009). The Significance of Identity to the Lived Realities of Muslim-Christian Dialogue. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*. 20 (2) Pp. 153-170.

Prideaux, M. (2009). Muslim-Christian Dialogue: The Gap Between Theologians and Communities. *International Journal of Public Theology*. 3 (4) Pp. 460-479.

Mel Prideaux PhD is a member of Westgate Chapel, Wakefield.

⁷ Interview with K, Muslim, resident and community worker, August 2004.

⁸ Interview with H, Christian community worker, February 2005.

¹⁰ The debate between these positions is exemplified in the essays in these collections: Gavin D'Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), John Hick and Paul Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988). ¹⁰ E.g. Michael Igrave, ed., *The Road Ahead: A Christian-Muslim Dialogue* (London: Church House Publishing, 2002).

Community struggled after 7/7

By Mel Prideaux

On 12 July 2005 at 6.30am, police teams appeared in Beeston Hill, the location of the Faith Together in Leeds 11 project, and began searching houses. News was gradually released that three of the four London bombers of 7 July 2005 were linked to the area. Three of the bombers had close links with the Hamara centre, one of the Faith Together in Leeds 11 community centres. All of these three young men had used the services of the centre. One of the young men was involved in youth work at Hamara, and the other two lived in the tight network of streets around the community centre.

The Hamara centre became the centre of media interest. After the bombings, a youth worker from Hamara was arrested and held for several weeks, although never charged. Journalists besieged the building and local people were scared to visit the GP who was based there at the time. Building Blocks (the other Faith Together in Leeds 11 community centre) provided facilities for the police, and although it received media attention was not placed under the same scrutiny as Hamara. It was not evident in national and international coverage that the two centres are closely linked through Faith Together in Leeds 11.

On 12 July, I was halfway through the fieldwork for my doctoral research. The main location of my fieldwork was the Faith Together in Leeds 11 community centres. It was instantly clear to me that these events would have a profound effect on my research. Most immediately this involved the interest of the press. Posters I had produced as part of my endeavour to secure 'informed consent' contained my mobile telephone number and email address. This led to telephone calls (although interestingly, not emails) from journalists, which I did not respond to.

Protecting my relationships with key contacts and the local community proved to be difficult and I faced much greater suspicion of my research than was the case before the bombings. This continued over the next year, when undercover journalists, in one case claiming to be a fellow research student from my University, attempted to uncover more information about the locality. However, the fact that I had been around the centres for some time, had been very keen to explain my research, and continued to be practically involved in the area helped in some ways to solidify my standing in the community. Indeed, I was the only academic researcher allowed access to one of the many community meetings following the bombings.

When checking with one of the gatekeepers about whether it would be acceptable for me to attend events such as community acts of commemoration he responded that it was as important that I came as 'you the researcher' as it was that I came as 'you the person'. He was sure that my attendance would be acceptable, and virtually expected.

This was an endorsement of my work as a researcher. However, the main fieldwork implication was that groups with which I had still to develop links – such as youth and the local Mosques – were now closed to me. The fear of being misrepresented was strong and, despite me being well known locally, I was still someone who might misrepresent or misinterpret what I heard or observed.

Local people were in a state of shock, and to some extent have still not recovered – not only from what the horror of what the local boys did in London – but also from the press



Mel Prideaux conducted a workshop on worship at the 2009 GA meetings. Photo by John Hewerdine

intrusion and coverage of the area. For me, it was difficult to know how best to respond. I was from the beginning clear that I would do nothing to undermine my professionalism and ethical standards. Until now, I have avoided writing about the experience because I do not want to risk my observations being sensationalised. What I can say with assurance is that the actions of a small group of misguided young men do not represent the views of a community. Such is the level of disbelief about what happened that conspiracy stories were, and probably still are, rife.

I can also say with assurance that I was genuinely aghast at the behaviour of sections of the press. The horror story was all some journalists wanted to hear – and all some would report. Others, however, were genuinely balanced and painted a vivid picture of a deprived area working hard to overcome its problems. It was unfortunate though that even journalists who wrote positive stories undermined their profession by obtaining their knowledge covertly – by lying in the hope that they might gain the horrific scoop of their career. It was notable how often bad news stories about the area were later retracted, but with not nearly as much publicity as they were first published. An exception was a particularly unpleasant piece written for the magazine 'Prospect' which gave a full apology (and a significant undisclosed settlement) for an appalling piece which attacked one of the pillars of the local community who has throughout been beyond reproach.

Local leaders went out of their way to tell the good news story about the area, whether journalists wanted to hear or not. This was an area with high levels of deprivation. Young men who do awful things often come from such areas. Many more young people from these areas lead lives of quiet desperation without resorting to horrific violence.

People were working hard to deal with the disaffection of young people, never realising perhaps the lengths that some might go to in order to feel they were being heard. The horror in Beeston Hill in July 2005 was palpable. It was evident in every perspiring face when we stood for a minute's silence in the street. It was less evident in the clicking cameras and whirring tapes of the reporters who watched us. I felt sorely let down by some sections of the media, and I was not even a local resident – just someone who was trying to find out about a local community where Christians and Muslims were working together for the greater good.

Mel Prideaux PhD is a member of Westgate Chapel, Wakefield.

League to help Meningitis UK

By Mary Wightman

The Unitarian Women's League has now entered its 2nd Century. Last year during our Centenary celebrations we all pulled out the stops and shone like new pins, re-creating our history and looking forward to the future with our goal to exist another 100 years. This can only be done by not allowing the cobwebs to gather again, by looking for ways of keeping our sparkle and enthusiasm alive, which I know, as I have travelled around the country, is still very much at the hearts of our League members.

As president of the Women's League, my journeys, so far this year, have taken me the length and breadth of the UK where I have witnessed great work going on and have been made to feel very welcome. As this is a very unique year for both Bob, as president of the Unitarian General Assembly and me, as Women's League president, we were very fortunate to visit Australia and New Zealand. There, I was introduced to some of the League members in Adelaide and was very intrigued to hear they call themselves "Women's League and friends". This was a wonderful way of including the men folk without losing their identity – food for thought.

Like every organisation, we have had our highs and lows and one of our lows was when we thought we would *not* be able to take part in our General Assembly. This was a very sad decision we had to make, however, "all good things come to those who wait" and we are delighted to say that, with the changes made, we *will* be joining all our friends in Nottingham during GA proceedings. Women's League is *not* against change. However, we feel change should be done with collaboration, consultation and communication with all concerned.

At our last meeting, Ann Hughes, intimated her wish to step down from her position as National Secretary. This came as a shock to all concerned. Ann has been a diligent and dependable part of our League for the past 11 years and will be a hard act to follow. On a lighter note I am sure all our League members will join me in wishing Ann health and happiness in the new life she is about to embark on.

This year our National Project is "Meningitis UK". This charity is striving to raise money to discover a vaccine to erad-



Mary Wightman, president of the Women's League, spoke at Westgate Chapel, Wakefield about the work of the League and, in particular, its current fund-raising project for Meningitis UK. Photo by Kate Taylor

icate this debilitating, life threatening and indeed life-taking disease which can attack without warning and at any age. For more information on meningitis, see www.meningitisuk.org/

I would ask that congregations consider donating to this very important cause and if you are kind enough to do so, cheques should be made payable to "The Women's League Project Account" and sent to Mrs Eunice Smith, 14 Lynnwood Drive, Rochdale, Lancs, OL11 5YX before the General Assembly meeting in April. The Women's League, over the years, has raised more than £93,000 in the past 12 years for various charities both at home and abroad. We pride ourselves in the knowledge that through our work we keep the name of Unitarianism alive. Keep up the good work ladies.

Mary Wightman is national president of the Women's League.



2010 General Assembly Meetings 8-11 April in Nottingham

Every year, the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches holds Annual Meetings, for delegates from congregations, fellowships, district associations and affiliated societies. All Unitarians are welcome. Bookings are due 25 Feb.

For more information and booking forms see: www.unitarian.org.uk/info/ga-intro.shtml

2009 delegates photo by John Hewerdine

Lent: With faith we have a chance

By Jean Bradley

Each of us has a private scripture, not about how God appeared to other people at other times, but about how God appears to us now.

Some of us keep it secret to ourselves. Some of us confide it to those we love.

Such private scriptures are made up of small incidents which, as we continue to ponder them, turn into modest parables. Don't discard your own parables; they are your life experience. In them is the pattern and purpose you seek.

— *Tales of Body and Soul* by Lionel Blue

Lent started this week and as I do every year, I will try, but it's not always easy to give things up for Lent. It's so easy to be tempted by that extra chocolate or to spend more money than we should and so on. There are two perspectives on sin I'd like to consider in relation to Lent.

Julian of Norwich asks, 'What is sin?', and decides that on a personal level it is nothing. And in some ways, I agree with her. Yet in Luke 4:1-13, Jesus is being tempted, and it certainly doesn't seem like 'nothing'. Let us set the scene. Jesus has taken himself off into the wilderness, there would be hardly any shelter from the blazing day sun and it would also be very cold at night. Food would probably consist of wild berries and very little else, as this would be a barren area. So the body and mind would suffer in those conditions even for a couple of days, but he had to endure 40 days and 40 nights.

And in the story, the devil goads Jesus by saying that he is capable of turning the stones to bread and therefore can have plenty of food. And Jesus says, 'man shall not live by bread alone'.

But those are not the authentic words from the mind of Jesus, for he is reiterating the words of Moses, who said, *And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no. And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live.*

— *Deuteronomy* 8:2-3

So that important lesson is illustrated twice — once in the Hebrew Bible and again in the time of Jesus' temptation, and that lesson is as important to us today as it was then. For our spirituality needs to be prioritised in our lives. We may consider that a person in hunger must think of food above all else and we can all agree that no one in this world should suffer through lack of food, shelter and safety, but the temptation story is talking about power and control, not literally hunger.

The devil shows Jesus all the land as far as he can see and says he will give Jesus the power to rule it all if Jesus would only bow down before him. (Haven't we all seen that image just lately with the collapse of so many banks? Haven't we seen those people with their high ranking positions, still collect their millions of pounds bonuses while other people have lost their savings?) Tom Wolfe's book 'Bonfire of the Vanities' named one of



Photo by Christopher Bruno

his main characters, Sherman McCoy a 1980's Wall Street bond trader, 'Master of the Universe' for he believed that he had power above all things and all people. And the same title 'MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE' now is given to those bankers who have put themselves before those they are employed to serve.

How close this is to the temptation of Jesus, who is offered all the world as long as he submits to the devil. For maybe the devil is not a horned and hooved creature, but a business man in an expensive car, with luxury homes and with all the right acquaintances. A man or woman who can show that all material things are possible if only we bow down to the world of power.

And finally, in the story, we have the devil asking Jesus to throw himself down from a high place, to see if God and the angels will protect him. And for me, this is the ultimate offence, to challenge and ridicule a person's faith. What kind of person can sneer at another's beliefs? Perhaps only those who have a too much self belief in their importance and superiority.

We should look at the many forms of temptations we experience. There are the temptations to be greedy and grasping, these are childlike enticements where we want more chocolate or someone else's toys, but as we grow up and become adult, the childish greed can move into need for power and control. And if that power is gained by aggression and negative action, it can make that person become our own self-serving God.

For in our need for power, we can consider ourselves above all, even above the Divine. And that is the beginning of conflict and unhappiness, whether it be on the world stage or simply with our own family or friends. We as adults have to take our responsibility for our actions, we have to live with our behaviour.

Julian of Norwich said, "Ah! Wretched sin, what art thou? Thou art nought." (13th Revelation from 'Revelation of Divine Love' c1393). I believe she meant that all the things we are tempted by, all the power and ownership we crave are nothing. Nothing, for they are not permanent. We lose desire for things once we have them. They are only material things and will fade and die. Julian of Norwich believed that being secure in faith makes us realise that these cravings are nothing. And with that, I agree. With God to guide us, we have to be responsible only to ourselves. With faith, we have a chance. Without faith, we may consider ourselves to be Masters of the Universe. Which should we choose?

The Rev Jean Bradley is a Unitarian minister based in Cheshire.

Iona makes a 'migration of intelligence'

After volunteering with AIDS-affected children in Swaziland, Kensington Unitarian **Iona Blair** listened to her 'inner wakefulness' and returned to Africa to study.

Some of you might know me from among the Kensington Unitarian Church Congregation, or recognise me from Hucklow Summer School from some years ago. I am Iona (younger daughter of Jim and Caroline Blair), and I have recently graduated from university in Social Anthropology to be let loose on the world. I have been attempting for some time to draw together some of the multicoloured threads of my life and to listen carefully to my heart's pulse, to hear what it has in mind.

Whilst I delighted in many of the insights and revelations my academic pursuits had to offer, the pressured canister of a library-based existence, interrupted only by the sharp tick-tick-tick of an ominous clock in an exam hall, became wearing for my spirit which seeks the play of nature and bird song. I packed a rucksack whenever I could and escaped to the countryside to revel in organic farm gardens; making friends with trees, birds and humans, and reconnecting with the vital source of life – soil, water, seed, breath.

But sadly, since my identity of 'student' has met its end, I am ever confronted with the questions 'What are you going to do now?' 'What job will you get?' Or more frighteningly 'What do you plan to do with the rest of your life?' Well, I'm not sure about the 'rest of my life'. (Who knows what will happen? Perhaps we will all disappear in Gaia's Revenge. Perhaps a new era will dawn with unforeseen bliss and abundance and we will not need to structure our lives into rigid five-year plans to cope with a stricken world.)

But, fortunately, I do have some inklings that I've been tending to. Following on from three splendid and glorious months in which I volunteered as a teacher/carer at a neighbourhood care point in Swaziland in the summer of 2008 (set up for children who've lost a parent to HIV/AIDs, and for those whose families can't afford to send to school), my enthusiasm and love for the people I met, the children I sang and played with and for their beautiful land, has grown and matured, rather than diminished. I diverted as much of my studying to Africa and to problems and issues impacting on Africans and their natural inheritance, the life-giving land.

Although I wished to return to southern Africa for the summer of 2009, I felt torn about the environmental harm of flying (especially just for a few weeks holiday; cringing more than a little reflecting on my earlier traipsing around America, India and Cuba as a camera-happy tourist), and so decided to stay grounded in the UK instead; camping and cycling and working the autumn in some Kentish orchards. My Dad Jim, however, took a trip to Swaziland to visit the orphans at the SOS children's village in Mbabane, bringing them presents and sponsorship money from Kensington church for one little girl to go to school.

Meanwhile, I sought to channel my energies into a workable plan. Whilst standing up a tree on a Welsh mountain-top I captured just about enough mobile-phone signal to speak



Two friends at the care point where Iona Blair volunteered in Swaziland. Photo by Iona Blair

with the programmes manager of an organisation called Garden Africa, which co-runs various community-based projects in southern Africa, which encourage and support the resource-poor to grow their own food organically, preventing malnutrition, sickness and disease (related to the use of chemical pesticides and fertilisers), and providing an ecologically sound, sustainable mode of livelihood. The contribution seems simple – Garden Africa does not mobilise masses of high-wage consultants to tell people what to do, instead they appeal to the values land-based peoples have long cherished; seeking to undo some of the wreckage of agribusiness innovations that substitute the aim of sustainable well-being, for instantly quantifiable profit (aka 'economic growth').

Garden Africa has been working in Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, and most recently in Zimbabwe, where they are partnered with a permaculture training centre and an organisation called ZOPPA (Zimbabwe Organic Producers and Promoters Association). Between them they are aiming to make the most of the recent swerve in agricultural policy in Zimbabwe to help small-holders (established or aspirant) to set themselves up using organic growing methods to restore degraded soils and move away from a dependency on (oil-based) chemical fertilisers and GM seeds (sold via aggressive marketing campaigns by big multinationals such as Monsanto, keen to get third world farmers hooked on their products that need to be bought year after year). A wonderful woman, Fortunate Nyakanda, invited me to work with ZOPPA for six months whilst they conducted a survey to see what the prospects might be for establishing links between growers, sellers and consumers within Zimbabwe for organic produce. Although I am very eager to take her up on this invitation, in fact I've been hindered by my pennilessness and self-doubt about what useful skills I'd have to offer.

Hence, we arrive at where I am at present: extraordinarily keen to take up a place in an 18 month MPhil course in Environmental Management at the University of Cape Town (UCT), starting (take a deep breath) this month! As I drudged through the opacity of the internet for a signpost to the future, I

(Continued on next page)

It rained: The BUYAN Conference

By Angela Maher

Apparently, in the Peak District in November it sometimes rains. A lot. This explains why a herd of wet and bedraggled 18-35 year olds took refuge in the pub in the middle of an afternoon's walk. After drying ourselves off by the fire, we were forced to send for the cars when the rain got worse instead of better.

All in a day's fun for the Britain and Ireland Young Adults Network (BUYAN) annual conference at Great Hucklow.

The theme of the conference was 'Mind, Body and Spirit', so we didn't spend the whole time in the rain or the pub. We learnt to juggle, discussed sexuality and identity (with laughter), and became creative with the largest box of arts and crafts supplies you've ever seen. As usual, the best part of the weekend was developing old, and new, friendships. This is especially true for those of us who don't live near other Unitarian young adults.

Our next event will be at the General Assembly meetings in Nottingham in April, where we will be working hard on the GA Zette, the magazine of the meeting. We look forward to seeing you there, and asking you to willingly volunteer to write an article.



Buyan members on a rainy walk.

If you're a young adult and you'd like to get involved in BUYAN, you can find us on Facebook or join our discussion lists by emailing allan@buyan.org.uk.

Angela Maher is a member of Unitarian New Meeting, Birmingham

Fellow Unitarian made Iona's studies possible

(Continued from previous page)

came upon a splendid course, at a good university, in the right part of the world that might equip me with some skills that might be of use to the likes of ZOPPA, and other enriching organisations in southern Africa.

And believe it or not, the staff in the UCT department of Environment and Geography were willing to accept my late application; and then, to gladly offer me a place. And, a generous Unitarian offered me a loan to pay the university fees, for which I am grateful.

I have told this long and winding tale largely in order to share with you some of my joys, discoveries and tribulations of the last months and years. If you should have any comments or suggestions, please send me an e-mail, or send word through Unitarian ears in my direction. I hope you might send your (personal, moral, and/or financial) support to Garden Africa, ZOPPA, the SOS village children and mothers, and to all those other assemblies of committed heroes and heroines who through their actions, remind us:

*Humankind is being led along an evolving course,
through this migration of intelligences,
and though we seem to be sleeping,
there is an inner wakefulness
that directs the dream,*

*and that will eventually startle us back
to the truth of who we are.*

From 'Essential Rumi'.

Contact Iona at: iona_blair_silverfish@cantab.net Or c/o
40 Killowen Avenue, Northolt, Middlesex, UB5 4QT

See websites: www.gardenafrica.org.uk and www.zoppa.org.zw/ and www.sos-childrensvillages.org/

General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches

Director of Ministry

Part-time (0.4wte) Salary negotiable

The General Assembly is seeking a Director of Ministry to support the Chief Officer in the development of Ministry and be the first point of contact on Ministerial and Congregational matters. They will ensure the smooth running of the Ministry Commission and Interview Panel.

For an informal discussion please contact
Derek McAuley, Chief Officer on 0202 7240
2384, Dmcauley@unitarian.org.uk

For an information pack please contact
Mary-Jean Hennis
mhennis@unitarian.org.uk
or telephone 0202 7240 2384

Closing date: 22 March 2010.

Interviews: 1 April 2010.

Letters to the Editor

Use web avenues to promote Unitarians

To the Editor:

I was looking up Toribio Quimada, the founder of the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Philippines, on the internet and found there was no entry for him on Wikipedia. It occurs to me that this is one way that we can get more about Unitarianism out into public consciousness and raise our profile somewhere above the plimsoll line. Why not look up your local area on Wikipedia and see if it mentions your church under local churches. I did this for Monton and added a section about our church. If you are cunning you can also include a little about our ethos. Equally, if you know about some aspect of Unitarianism in history or overseas or simply a famous local figure who was Unitarian, why not write them up? Take care not to plagiarise (copy) someone else's words from a book – though it is good to put the book in your bibliography. I am not an expert at this and I am sure there are further refinements and links that can be made. Perhaps someone in the know (James Barry?) could give us a few tips. I have recently become the owner of an iPod touch which is like an iPhone but without the phone. I use this for worship music when we are without an organist. I was searching 'apps' the other day under the heading 'religious' and thought it would be excellent if we could produce a Unitarian app. Perhaps one for people wanting to know more (free) and another with daily meditations. As a student, I would like to see some of the hard-to-get older writings on Unitarianism and Free Christianity published in this format too. Much cheaper and more ecological than cutting down a tree to make a book! I really enjoy my *Inquirers*. Keep up the good work!

Nicky Jenkins

Student Lay Pastor

On placement at Monton, Manchester

Writer's view of materialism is too small

To the Editor:

John Pickering, 'All Aboard the Unitarian Train' *The Inquirer* 23 Jan., argues well for Unity and Oneness as the heart of Unitarianism, but is

dismissive of Darwin and evolution.

This is surprising because the key feature of evolution is the oneness of humanity – we are all cousins. Moreover, it is clear from recent writing that Darwin was motivated in publishing facts about evolution and the oneness of humanity not only by his love of truth but also by his hatred of slavery.

John says that evolution has not been proved, but it has been as clearly proved as the fact that the earth revolves round the sun. In the term 'theory of evolution' the word 'theory' is used scientifically – i.e. to mean 'a system of ideas formulated (by reasoning from known facts) to explain something'. (Oxford Reference Dictionary) The theory of evolution is fact based and in spite of what John says it IS 'scientifically accurate and provable'.

To say, as John does, that 'Darwinian evolution ... certainly provided scientific justification for tyrants like Hitler and Stalin' seems to me quite mistaken. Did either of those tyrants say 'Mass extermination is all right because Darwin said so'? Not to my knowledge. What about all the tyrants before Hitler and Stalin? What about Exodus 32v 27f? 'Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel ... 'Go forth ... and each of you kill your brother, your friend your neighbour' ... and about three thousand of the people fell on that day'. What a good job they didn't have modern arms.

It used to be said 'Your God is too small'. Nowadays it should also be said 'Your idea of science and materialism is too small'. Read Richard Dawkins' 'Unweaving the Rainbow' to see how science can deepen our wonder and awe. Like evolution, it is anything but the 'clunky, mechanistic universe' that John falsely claims is the 'universe of Newton and Darwin'.

Peter B Godfrey

Stonehouse

Thanks for '60s memories

Thank you, Ernest Baker, ('Unitarian "youf" have much to say', *The Inquirer*, 9 January) for re-evoking for us those creative years of the early '60s. None of us who took part in the 1962 youth presentation 'No thought

of the Harvest' at Lewisham Unitarian Church is ever likely to forget it. He asks, 'Are we any longer capable of truly recognising "the winds of the spirit blowing"? I think I should remind him that another of the songs I wrote for the occasion was:

'You can't put new wine

Into old bottles...

*The wine comes bubbling over the top,
If you screw down the stopper the
bottle goes pop,*

*So you can't put new wine into old
bottles...'*

The song contained two further verses which not everyone was comfortable with. For current examples of Goring song-making may I draw your attention to www.myspace.com/wildservice

Rosemary Goring

St Leonards on Sea, East Sussex

A 'good ground' for grouse shooting

To the Editor:

In his review (*The Inquirer*, 23 January) of two booklets by J. Eric Jones (*The Good Ground* and *Gardens of Faith*) Andrew M Hill brings his comments to a close with the words, 'But with grouses out of the way these are helpful guides ... I recommend them...'

The Rev Hill ends his article with favourable remarks as to the value of the publications, but his self-acknowledged grouses *do* get in the way and might well put off potential purchasers.

I do not wish to add weight to the rather trivial gripes by addressing them here, but one in particular needs to be countered. He criticises the use of postcodes to give locations of the places of worship, saying that this means 'a motor car and SatNav are essential to find them!' This is not so! Anyone with access to a computer – their own, or the local library's – merely has to enter the postcode and *Google* will provide a map, or a satellite view, of the location, together with directions of how to get there – by car or walking – or by bicycle if one prefers.

This was the reason for the inclusion of postcodes.

Ken Morgan

Chair of Unitarian Welsh Department and Secretary of Hen Dŷ Cwrdd, Cefn Coed y Cymer

Philip Tindall: dedicated Unitarian and scholar

The Rev Dr Philip Noble Tindall M.A., B.D., Ph.D.,
M.Litt.

Dedicated Unitarian and Scholar

Born 31 December 1910

Died 7 January 2010

A Service of Thanksgiving for the 99 years of life of Philip Tindall was held in his hometown of Pudsey recently. Philip was the consummate Unitarian, still learning well into his retirement. Some would describe Philip as 'one of the old school', which was true, and he was a minister and scholar until the day he died.

Philip was born in Pudsey on 31 December 1910 into the Tindall branch of a family who were founding fathers of Pudsey Unitarian Church. Perhaps his love of music and of Sherlock Holmes started in his childhood and from childhood until now Pudsey church had a special place in his heart. He grew up in the town, sharing family life with his younger brother Joe and started his working life as a plumber – a skill which he was very proud of and could discuss and advise on whenever required to do so.

In 1937, after studying for the ministry at the Unitarian College and Manchester University, Philip married his sweetheart of eight years, Maud Binks, at Pudsey Church. Philip and Maud were immensely proud of the fact that his grandparents, William Jones Noble and Sarah Clough, were the first couple to have their marriage solemnised in the church and Maud's grandparents, Montagu Binks and Sarah Haigh, were the second couple to have their marriage solemnised in the Church. Immediately after their wedding, Philip and Maud set out for his first ministry at Accrington, where he served for five years. He then moved to Sheffield Stannington for 10 years and for part of that time also serving the Fulwood Chapel. He then moved to the Ancient Chapel in Liverpool for ten years and then on to Killinchy in Northern Ireland for two years. Philip returned to Sheffield Fulwood for eight years and then went to Newcastle upon Tyne for his final ministry of four years, retiring thirty-four years ago in 1976. He worked for the whole of our ministry and was president of the Ministerial Fellowship in 1976.

All his life Philip was a 'thinker' and we sense that just by looking at his academic achievements. From Manchester University he received four degrees, BA, BD, MA and then a Doctor of Philosophy in 1950. At an age when most of us are retired, Philip was awarded the M. Litt. from Newcastle University when he was 69! His dissertation was on 'The Manchester Socinian Controversy, its background and sequel'.

His thinking influenced many generations and for three years he was delighted to be a tutor at Manchester College in Oxford where his knowledge of Hebrew and Greek plus Dissenting history was passed on to many students. Sadly he published very little – 'Gethsemane: Studies in the Passion of Jesus' in 1941 being his only (known) publication – but in 1993 and 1994 his lengthy articles on The Dissenters Chapels Act of 1844 appeared in Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society.

Philip gave so much in his marriage with Maud. In his own words, "We met in this (Pudsey) church and began our friendship when 19 years old." Maud gave him an even greater interest in music and he loved her work with choirs like the Sheffield Choral Society and the Huddersfield Choral Society but



The Rev Philip and Maud Tindall met at the Pudsey Unitarian Church when they were 19 and were together all their lives.

he also loved just hearing her play the organ in a small chapel. Without his beloved Maud, Philip could not have given half of what he gave to others. Loving children but being childless, Philip and Maud treated the children in their congregations as if they were part of the family and many, knowing them as 'Aunty and Uncle' remained in contact until the very end.

For many years Philip cared for Maud during her illness but it still came as a heavy blow when Maud died in 2004. Philip conducted her funeral service and the same hymns were used as for his own service. From the time of her death he withdrew into five and a half years of loneliness but those of us who met him, spoke to him on the phone or received a superb letter from him *always* written with a fountain pen, treasured those personal contacts.

Reserved and studious, Philip had a reputation among adults as a serious academic, and it tended to distance him. But those of us who got to know him well in his later years, found a warm and kindly friend with a 'twinkle in his eye' and 'a mischievous streak'.

He was proud of his learning and bought new books to add to his extensive collection right up until the final weeks of his life. He read texts in their original Hebrew, Greek and Latin – but the books he surrounded himself with had to contend with the other two passions in his life – the Church and his love of Maud.

– Janet Gadsby and the Rev Peter Hewis



A congregation of about 150 attended the service for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity held at Downpatrick on 24 January. The service was led by the minister, Rev Dr David Steers, and clergy from all the churches in the town took part as well as the Choir of the local Blackwater Integrated College. The visiting preacher was Rev Dr Johnston McMaster of the Irish School of Ecumenics. A collection taken at the service for the Disasters Emergency Committee for Haiti raised £735. The clergy who took part in the service were (front row) Very Rev H Hull (Church of Ireland), Rev Dr J McMaster (visiting preacher), Pastor J White (Baptist). Back Row: Rev S Burns (Church of Ireland), Rev E McCreave (Catholic), Rev Dr D Steers, Rev H Robinson (Presbyterian), Rev J Ewart (Church of Ireland).

— Rev Dr David Steers Downpatrick, Ballee & Clough Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Churches



Shrewsbury organist celebrates 90th birthday

On Sunday, 3 January, a joyous occasion took place at Shrewsbury Unitarian Church, when a special Service was held to celebrate the 90th Birthday of the much loved and highly gifted organist Mrs Joyce Griffiths. The service, with a musical theme, was led by Mr Sandy Ellis and the 60-strong congregation came from far and wide. As well as a strong turnout by members of the congregations, there were former neighbours of Joyce; members of the Spiritualist Church which also uses the premises and for whom Joyce also plays the organ; and family members from as far afield as Aberystwyth, Machynlleth and Los Angeles. At the conclusion of the service, Mrs Joan Hughes, the Chair of the Congregation presented Joyce with a floral bouquet and invited her to unveil a plaque mounted on the organ to mark her 50 years' service as

organist. She was then invited to cut a birthday cake decorated with chalices and musical notes, made by Sue Davies, before joining everyone in a celebratory drink. The family members then adjourned to the Lord Hill Hotel for a birthday lunch.

— Sandy Ellis

Find yourself in Warminster

Calling all Unitarians in the South. A date for your diary. Sept 17th to 19th. A weekend of self discovery, at Ivy House, Warminster, has been arranged by Kathy Beckett and Jan Laker. Josephine Seccombe, a talented facilitator, will lead us in exploring the Enneagram, a useful tool to help in relationships with family, friends, work and committees. There will be a full supporting programme based on "This I Believe". Ivy House has 18 single rooms. Price £95 full board plus £10 conference fee. Booking forms are available now. kathy@kpb.gotadsl.co.uk or 13, Neilson Close, Chandlers Ford, Eastleigh, Hants, SO53 1GR

Marriage equality on Newington agenda

In March 2008 Newington Green Unitarians stopped conducting weddings until the law allows churches to treat same-sex and opposite-sex couples equally, but instead to offer blessing services for all couples. A 'marriage equality day' of discussion and debate, is planned for Newington Green Unitarian Church, on Saturday 27 February, from 10.30 am to 1.30 pm, followed by lunch provided by members of the congregation. Email guybentham@hotmail.com for more information about the event – and details of the speakers involved.

Cross St Chapel
Manchester M2 1NL
Tel: 0161 8340019

email: revjyb@gmail.com

HARRIS MANCHESTER COLLEGE CONFERENCE: TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF UNITARIAN MINISTRY

We are holding a Conference which, we hope, will appeal to all Ministers, Lay Pastors, Lay Leaders and Students for the Ministry from Monday June 21st to Wednesday, June 23rd. (Monday at 4.00 p.m. until Wednesday lunch). The cost will be £108, plus a small conference fee of £10.

This year our theme is "Towards a Theology of Unitarian Ministry." We will begin with a facilitated session on personal theology of ministry. Speakers will include Rev Andrew Hill on Unitarian traditions of ministry and Peggy Morgan, Fellow of Mansfield College, Oxford on Inter-faith perspectives. The Annual Service at the Conference will be conducted by the Rev. Jeff Gould, Minister of Bury Chapel.

We choose to meet when the College is holding its end of term proceedings, which will include the annual meeting of honorary Governors and Friends on Tuesday afternoon.

Please contact Jane Barraclough, preferably by email at the address above, if you have never been before and would like to come. The deadline for bookings to be received is the 1st June. We would like to see all those interested in the topic.

Jane Barraclough
Secretary of Harris Manchester College Oxford
Ministerial Old Students' Association